

Luke 2:1-20

This Is The Night!
The Rev. Julia Fritts

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"Mary treasured all these things, and pondered them in her heart."

Let us pray. Holy and limitless God, it is *you* we treasure, *your* presence we ponder in our hearts. Be with us in this place as we celebrate the night of your birth, and prepare our hearts for the night when you will come again. In the name of the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the night! Two thousand and ten years ago this night, a baby boy was born to a young unmarried girl, who wrapped him scraps of linen, and laid him in the rough, hard wood of a creche. Can you imagine a lowlier birth than this? A riskier setting for the safekeeping of the very Light of the World? Mary could not have known what was ahead for her when she said yes to the angel Gabriel nine months prior. She could not have known all that was ahead for her infant son. Surely if she had known all that was to come, she might not have been able to bear it. And yet bearing it all, in just this way, was a pivotal part of God's plan. On this night, we celebrate the birth of Love incarnate, knowing what we know now. But on this night two thousand and ten years ago, how did Mary know to trust God, to treasure the news of the shepherds, and to ponder it all in her heart? And how do we discern God's love in designs like this?

I'm sure we've all wondered about this whole plan - about how Almighty God *could* have designed it all otherwise. This little baby boy could have been born into royalty, wrapped in the purple velvet of kings, and laid in the soft warmth of featherbeds - protected from every hardship; given every advantage. This little baby boy could have been born the warrior king, the Royal Messiah, that Jerusalem was waiting for! Born into power and glory, to put all nations under his feet. But no. God chose a drafty old stable, on a cold clear winter night, with only the breath of the oxen to warm the damp little newborn, lying in the rough hay. What a hard plan the God of love chose to bear that Love into the world; how this must have grieved the Lord of all Creation! But all so necessary, so that noone, no matter how lowly, would ever be left out of the saving and eternal grace that this one, tiny baby would usher in.

This is the night! We hear that phrase tonight, and it echoes in our hearts to a night up ahead: the night before Easter, when we celebrate the Great Vigil and wait in darkness for the Light of the World to return, resurrected from death upon the rough, hard wood of the Cross. Again - what a hard design - how the Trinity must have grieved and mourned to see the Beloved Son, the Lord of Life, nailed to that cross! Why not a merciful and noble and natural death, with royal attendants, and comfort, and dignity? Why *this* design, given that God could have chosen anything? For the same reason, I think, as the lowly creche. God knew that only the creche, and only the cross, would be deep enough, and wide enough, to hold all of us: to bear the entire range, and include the widest possible scope of the human condition. Noone could ever be born too low to not find a place in that manger, and noone would ever suffer anything that was not already lifted up onto that cross. God's design was one that would forever scoop up and hold all of God's beloved children, no matter how lowly they saw themselves, no matter how far they had fallen, no matter how deeply they suffered: this design was the only way to hold all of creation. What a design this was! What love is this!!! It is beyond our imagining, to be loved this much, but this is the love

of God that we are grappling with. It is only right for us to wonder and to be amazed, especially on this night, when God's long awaited plan, told for ages already by the prophets, would at last become incarnate as the infant King, the baby Jesus. And there was Mary, trusting God, but probably wondering a little bit herself about God's plan for her - a plan which wasn't looking too awesome at the moment. There was Mary, hearing the words of the angels and the shepherds, remembering the words of the angel Gabriel nine months prior. Our Gospel tells us that she treasured all these things, and pondered them in her heart. Mary could not have known all that would come; only that God would be with her through it. Isn't that the truth about us too?

Mary could never have known that her baby boy would one day walk on water, or calm the storm, or raise the dead; that her tender child was Lord of All Creation, born to gather all of us, for all time, back into the loving embrace of the One Holy, Living and Triune God who made us, who loves us, and who wants us back. Mary could not have known each step that she would have to endure, the unbearable grief of seeing her son crucified to death on a rough cross, wrapped sadly once again in strips of linen, and sealed in a cold dark tomb. How could any of us step forward into our lives, if we knew what we would have to endure? Mary didn't know, and we don't know, what trials await us. But God is with us through everything: *Emmanuel, God With Us*, no matter what. And Mary could not have known, just as we do not know, the joys ahead for us, either! Imagine if Mary knew her son would rise from the dead, would walk and teach again, wounds exposed and love alive? How could she have born the joy and wonder of seeing her son ascend into heaven? To know that by him, and with him, and in him, all of creation would be restored to the loving Lord who created it? If that's not a proud moment for a mama, I don't know what is! Beyond proud, of course: sheer wonder, I'm sure, to see God's will made manifest, and sheer wonder to imagine that God has a use for *any* of us lowly ones, to help manifest God's will for the world.

But you see, that's God's design again. We are a part of that. Can you imagine? God requires *us* to step forward, to accept the next piece of the plan ahead of us. We don't need to know the end of the story; just like Mary, we don't need to know all that will come. We just need to consider God's will for us, no matter how surprising and unexpected it might be. We need to ponder Mary's words, when she agreed to this truly radical and dangerous and wild plan of becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and bearing the son of God into the world. As a young unmarried virgin of about fourteen years old. In a cold stable, with not even a blanket for the babe, or a bed to lay him in. She did not say "Well, I'm not sure that makes sense. I would be stoned to death, you see, being unmarried, you know. Thank you very much for the gift of free will; I think I'll pass on this one." No, Mary said not only yes, but she said "*Let it be unto me, according to thy will.*" And then she went further to proclaim "*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit REJOICES in God my savior!*" How's that for trust in God's design? How's that for an example to try on, the next time you sense a turn in your road that you didn't expect, that doesn't quite fit your idea of a reasonable future? God teaches us over and over again that we can trust God, that we are not alone, and that there is a loving plan for our lives. *Emmanuel, God With Us*, is indeed our Lord Jesus, who was born into the earthy realities of life on earth, and walked every step of the way in human form, so that we can call on his near presence through every step of our walk, all the way through our sufferings and our death, and into the joy of his presence again!

We are not meant to know the details, just as Mary didn't know. We are meant to step forward like she did, faithfully and even with joy, calling on our Lord Emmanuel to be *God With Us* at every step: into this new year, with all the hope and challenge that it will bring. As we ponder the mystery of the Creche and the Cross, of the depth and the reach of God's design, and the magnitude of a Love this large, let us be overcome with awe on this night. May the blessings of wonder and trust and acceptance for God's limitless love be yours, and may the peace of God continue to expand your hearts, and bring you into joy.

Amen. Alleluia!

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